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A Comprehensive Grammar

Bruce Donaldson

Dutch

A Comprehensive Grammar

2nd edition

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- Particular attention to areas of confusion and difficulty
- Dutch–English parallels highlighted throughout the book

Bruce Donaldson lectured in Dutch, German and Afrikaans in the (then) Department of German, Russian and Swedish Studies at the University of Melbourne (Australia) from 1973 to 2004. Now in retirement, he is a research fellow in his former department.

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A Comprehensive Grammar

2nd edition

Bruce Donaldson

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Preface

When I started to write the first edition of this book in 1977—it originally appeared under the title *Dutch Reference Grammar*—there were no textbooks suitable to the needs of the advanced English-speaking learner of Dutch. The descriptions of Dutch written by Dutch grammarians were of very little practical use to the foreign learner, and the few contrastive grammars pitched at English-speaking people were either antiquated or only suitable for the raw beginner, or most usually both. The best book on the market was W.Z. Shetter's *Introduction to Dutch*, Martinus Nijhoff, a book which is now also published, in totally revised form, by Routledge (*Dutch: An Essential Grammar*, 2007). The lack of any comparable predecessor, combined with the limited utility to the foreign learner of the descriptions of Dutch in Dutch, meant that quite a lot of pioneer work went into the creation of this book, particularly with regard to comparing and contrasting Dutch structures with English structures to aid the learning process. The usefulness of this book has proved itself by going through numerous editions over 27 years; it is used throughout the world, even in non-English-speaking countries through lack of anything comparable in the languages of those countries.

But since the first edition appeared in 1981 under the title *Dutch Reference Grammar* (Martinus Nijhoff, The Hague), two important changes have occurred in the field, both of which in themselves necessitated a thorough revision of this book, quite apart from my desire to remove the various imperfections that had lingered on through all editions. First, the Nederlandse Taalunie, a joint Dutch–Flemish body charged, among other things, with overseeing all projects concerned with the standardization of the language, was founded in 1980. The Taalunie was ultimately responsible for ensuring that the *Algemene Nederlandse Spraakkunst* (Wolters-Noordhoff, Groningen/Wolters, Leuven, 1984) saw the light of day. The *ANS*, as it is now affectionately known, has since established itself as the

standard reference work on all issues of Dutch grammar. It too has since been thoroughly revised and you can now even consult the *eANS* on-line on the site of the Nederlandse Taalunie. The *ANS*, although written in Dutch and from a Dutch point of view (thus no contrast with structures in any other language being made) is of use to the advanced foreign learner of the language. Given that *Dutch: A Comprehensive Grammar* contains 400 odd pages, whereas the *ANS* consists of 1,718 pages, clearly it deals with issues in much greater detail than this book, but its existence by no means renders this grammar superfluous—it simply means that there is now a suitable grammar one can proceed to after having mastered the contents of this book. The *ANS* is also useful, in fact indispensable, if you require more information on a given point than I offer here, but be warned that using the *ANS* is not for the faint-hearted, certainly if you are not well-schooled in grammatical terminology. The Dutch names of all the parts of speech are given at the beginning of their relevant sections in this book to enable the learner to look them up in the *ANS*.

The second important development in the standardization and description of Dutch that has appeared since 1981, is the long-awaited revision of the *Woordenlijst der Nederlandse Taal* (Martinus Nijhoff, The Hague, 1954), the final word on issues of spelling. The new spelling according to the prescriptions of both the 1995 and the 2005 editions of the *Woordenlijst* have been incorporated into this book, not only in the chapter on spelling but also in the spelling used throughout the book. The changes have in fact been minimal so the learner should not be intimidated by the fact that there are for the time being two spellings in use. The *Woordenlijst* can also be consulted online on the site of the Nederlandse Taalunie.

This reference grammar is aimed at the tertiary and upper secondary student as well as at the private student who has a reasonable knowledge of grammatical terminology and whose knowledge has already gone beyond what the more basic beginners' grammars and courses offer. It is not intended to replace the existing beginners' grammars, except perhaps in the case of a student with some prior knowledge who simply wishes to consolidate that knowledge, but it *is* intended to complement those grammars.

By necessity this grammar is quite strongly prescriptive. In a book of this size it was not possible, nor indeed desirable, to describe every detail of the spoken and written language. I have endeavoured to prescribe forms which I know to be generally acceptable in both the spoken and written languages of The Netherlands. If at any stage I have mentioned spoken

forms which are not acceptable in writing, or written forms which are not usual in the spoken language, this has been either clearly stated in each instance or the abbreviations 'coll.' for colloquial, 'arch.' for archaic or 'form.' for formal/literary have been used. On occasions I use the Dutch word 'plat' in the English text to describe phenomena, as it is commonly used in Holland and has no direct equivalent in English: if a structure is described as 'plat' it is considered substandard or stigmatized and is thus better avoided by the learner—spoken Dutch, like spoken British English in particular, is a language that commonly betrays one's regional and social origins!

The reader who reaches for this book to consult a chapter specifically on syntax will be disappointed. This is a notoriously difficult aspect of grammar to discuss in a limited number of words, given that this book is not intended to be an *ANS* in English, but more importantly I am yet to see an exposé of the syntax of Dutch presented in such a way that it could be of any practical use to the foreign learner of the language. The main syntactical issues are dealt with throughout the book in the context of the particular point of grammar under discussion at the time. Previous editions of this book did not attempt to cover the notoriously difficult issue of adverbs of modality, i.e. **eens**, **even**, **maar**, **nou** and **toch** in particular. For this I have received some not entirely unjustified criticism and therefore I have attempted to rectify the matter in this edition (see 10.8). I acknowledge my indebtedness to *Nederlandse grammatica voor anderstaligen* by A. Fontein and A. Pescher-ter Meer (NCB, Utrecht, 1985) for a few of the examples quoted.

If past experience is any guide, it is highly likely that this book will be reprinted at some future date. All constructive criticism and suggestions will be gratefully received and acknowledged by the author and heeded in any future edition. Please email your comments to me at bcr@unimelb.edu.au.

Bruce Donaldson
Melbourne (Australia), June 2008

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Abbreviations

ABN	Algemeen Beschaafd Nederlands (i.e. Standard Dutch)
arch.	archaic
c.	common gender
coll.	colloquial
def.	definite
fig.	figurative
form.	formal
i.v.	irregular verb
inh.	inhabitant
lit.	literally
m.v.	mixed verb
n.	neuter
(n.)	footnote
o.s.	oneself
pej.	pejorative
pron.	pronounced
s.o.	someone
s.t.	something
<	derived from
=	is/means the same as
*	not grammatically correct/not possible

Chapter 1

Pronunciation
Uitspraak

It is assumed that anyone using this book is acquainted with the basics of Dutch pronunciation and thus they are not dealt with here, but there are certain idiosyncrasies and variants of pronunciation that may be new even to the more advanced student and they *are* dealt with here. In addition, a few tips on things to look out for are discussed.

It is true that the pronunciation of Dutch is not particularly easy for many English-speaking beginners to master. It is commonly believed by the Dutch that it is the consonants that constitute the difficulty, and in particular **ch** and **g**. Some students do have trouble with this sound for a while, as well as with **r**, but the real traps lie in the vowels, and in particular in the diphthongs.

1.1 Vowels

Possibly the one sound that virtually all English-speaking people have trouble in coming to grips with is **ui** [œy]. Pay careful attention to how this diphthong is articulated.

The distinction between **ij/ei** on the one hand and **ee** on the other is also difficult for many. It is very important to distinguish clearly between these two sounds as they are of course phonemic[1] and failure to do so can lead to a breakdown in communication, e.g. **geil** 'randy' and **geel** 'yellow', **krijg** 'get' and **kreeg** 'got'. These two sounds are particularly prone to

1 This means that the distinction is significant to meaning. Two sounds that differ in their articulation but which difference is irrelevant to meaning, are said to be allophones of the one phoneme. Examples of this are the two pronunciations of 'th' in English (e.g. 'that' and 'thick') and the voiceless and voiced pronunciations of **g** in Dutch (e.g. northern **gaan** versus southern **gaan**).

being confused when they occur in close proximity to each other, e.g. **gelegenheid** 'opportunity', **de hele lijst** ' the whole list'.

After some contact with the living language you may notice that quite a lot of Dutch people pronounce the short **a** in words like **hand**, **land** and **man** in a way that resembles an **o** to an English-speaking ear. You do not need to copy it, but you may become aware of it.

The short **e** in Dutch is usually pronounced [æ] not [ɛ], although the latter sound does occur; in other words like the vowel in 'fat', not that in 'bed'. Failure to distinguish between the vowel in Dutch **bed** and English 'bed' in this way is of only minor importance. This quite subtle difference between the languages accounts, for example, for why the Dutch might occasionally write (and always pronounce) the English loanword **tram** as **trem**, as [æ] and [ɛ] are allophones in Dutch; the clear difference to an English ear in the vowels of 'Henk' and 'Hank' is hardly audible to a Dutch ear.

Some Dutch people still make a distinction in the way they pronounce the short **o** in certain words, e.g. as in **hok** and **bok**; the vowel in the former is more or less the same as in the English word 'hock' (i.e. more open), but that in the latter is closer to the vowel in English 'born' (i.e. more closed). In the west of the country, where standard Dutch has evolved, it is no longer usual to make this distinction and one can apply the vowel of **hok** across the board. So if you hear people using the vowel of **bok** (the distinction is a historical one) do not feel obliged to follow suit.

The vowel sound in the adjectival endings **-ig** and **-lijk** is identical; it is a *schwa* [ə], i.e. it is pronounced the same as the weak, colourless vowel at the end of **grote**, e.g. **gelukkig**, **vriendelijk**.

If one keeps in mind that one of the basic tenets of Dutch spelling is that long vowels in closed syllables are written double, but not in open syllables[2] e.g. **eet** > **eten**, **boom** > **bomen**), the **e**'s and **o**'s in loanwords like those given below must be pronounced long, although there is a strong tendency for English speakers to equate them with the same words in English and pronounce these vowels too short (the vowels in question are given in italic type):

politie, provocatie, positief
definitief, evalueren, eventueel, negatief

2 Related to this are the principles of syllabic division in Dutch which are important when it comes to hyphenating a word at the end of a line: **po-li-tie, pro-vo-ca-tie; e-ven-tu-eel, de-fi-ni-tief**. (see 2.6).

1.2 Consonants

One of the most stubborn traces of an English accent in Dutch is the presence of aspiration after stops, particularly after **p**, **t** and **k**. If you listen closely to the difference in the consonants between Dutch **pot**, **top** and **kat** on the one hand and English 'pot', 'top' and 'cat' on the other, you should become aware that the 'breathiness' which follows these consonants in English is lacking in Dutch. Continuing to aspirate in Dutch does not impede understanding at all, but it will continue to mark you as English-speaking, but Germans too have a tendency to do this in Dutch. The tendency for English speakers to aspirate the voiced stops **b**, **d** and **g** is much less and does not usually pose a problem.

Remember that in Dutch, as in German, voiced obstruents (i.e. **b**, **d**, **g**, **v**, **z**) do not occur in word final position, thus the final sounds in **bed** and **heb** are pronounced **t** and **p** respectively, and this also explains why the stems of the verbs **leven** and **reizen** are **leef** and **reis**, where the change in pronunciation is indicated in the spelling, which is not the case with the verbal stems **wed** (< **wedden** 'to bet') and **heb** (< **hebben** 'to have').

Intervocalic **d**'s are commonly vocalized (= become a vowel) in Dutch, i.e. they are pronounced either as **i** or **j**. The advanced learner will already be acquainted with this phenomenon in words like **goede** (pron. **goeie**) and **rode** (pron. **rooie**), but may be unaware of other subtleties in this respect. In many words with an intervocalic **d** one has the option of vocalizing it or not, e.g. **raden/raaie** 'to guess', **beneden/beneje** 'downstairs', **rijden/rije** 'to drive', but in **Goede Vrijdag**, **goede** remains **goede** because it is an elevated concept, as it is in **Kaap de Goede Hoop** 'the Cape of Good Hope' and **vergoeden** 'to reimburse'; the **d** in **ouders** is never vocalized either. But in the word **Leiden** sociological connotations are attached to whether one does or does not vocalize the **d**—to do so is either very low class or very high class, while the masses in between do not vocalize it. However, in **laden** 'to load', similar as the word might be to **raden**, it is considered 'plat' to vocalize the **d**.

One should be aware of the substantial difference between a Dutch and an English 'l'; a Dutch **l** is said to be thicker. The difference is all the more obvious when a back vowel (i.e. **a**, **o** or **u**) follows or precedes the **l**. Listen closely to how the Dutch pronounce **land**, **lof**, **kul**, **vol**, **wel**, etc.

Possibly the most difficult of all consonants is **r**. First one needs to decide whether one is going to adopt a dental **r** (called **een tong-r**) or a uvular **r** (called **een huig-r**). Both commonly occur in Dutch, but the latter is by far

the more common these days. Remember that **r** in all positions must be audible in Dutch, even in final position where it can be particularly difficult for English-speaking people to pronounce, e.g. **kar**, **puur**, **moeder**. The trick here is to slightly sound the **r** by trilling it without overdoing it.

It often escapes the notice of foreign learners of Dutch that a Dutch **s** is different from an English 's'. As there is not really a 'sh'[3] sound in Dutch for **s** to contrast with, **s** tends to be pronounced with a slight **sh**-like quality. Listen closely to how the Dutch pronounce **sok**, **los** and **mus** for example.

Many Dutch speakers break up the cluster formed by an **l** or **r** followed by another consonant by inserting a *schwa* between them (compare substandard English 'filem' for 'film'). Generally speaking the practice is not as stigmatized in Dutch as in English as far as **l** plus another consonant is concerned, but between **r** and another consonant it is necessary to insert a *schwa* to facilitate pronunciation: **elf**, **film**, **melk**, **twaalfde**; **kerk**, **lantaarn**, **zwerm**.

1.3 Regional differences

For a linguistic area as small as it is, the Dutch-speaking territories harbour a surprising number of dialects. In The Netherlands monolingual dialect speakers are virtually non-existent these days and in Belgium they are fast becoming a rarity too. Non-native-speakers do not therefore have to fear being confronted with dialect as they will always be addressed in something approximating ABN, as indeed even native-speakers of Dutch from other regions are. Nevertheless, certain characteristics of the dialects are frequently heard in the ABN of people from other regions. Only the most common of these are dealt with below. These differences are no greater to the Dutch than those between British and American English are to native-speakers of English and thus mutual comprehension is not impeded in any way at all.

1.3.1 *The dropping of final n*

It is usual for most speakers of Dutch, regardless of their regional origins,

3 This sound, written **sj** in Dutch, only occurs per chance in diminutives (e.g. **huisje**) and otherwise word initially only a few loanwords (e.g. **sjouwen** 'to lug', **sjaal** 'scarf').

to drop their **n**'s, in other words to drop the **n** from the ending **-en** which so commonly occurs in infinitives and strong past participles as well as in the plural of nouns. Other than in the slowest, most deliberate of speech, one is advised as a foreigner to follow suit here and to drop one's **n**'s; to do otherwise sounds very unnatural. Note that **n**'s that occur in the middle of words as a result of compounding are also dropped, e.g. **boekenkast**, **zeventien** (see 2.7).

The most distinctive shibboleth of easterners (i.e. from Groningen south to the Achterhoek) is that they pronounce their **n**'s. In fact, the **e** of the ending tends to be swallowed, with assimilation of the **n** to the preceding consonant commonly occurring, e.g. **praten** > **praatn**, **lopen** > **loopm**. Because the east of the country is predominantly rural and far from the economic hub in the west, eastern Dutch is commonly stereotyped as yokel-talk, typified by pronouncing all final **n**'s.

1.3.2 *Characteristics of plat Hollands*

In the west of the country, where everyone fancies they speak standard Dutch, a couple of characteristics of the pronunciation of the underlying dialects are heard in the ABN of the working class which are regarded as stigmatized by the upper echelons. First and foremost this applies to the tendency of many Hollanders to slightly diphthongize—more than is otherwise considered acceptable in ABN—the long vowels **ee** and **oo** as in **weten** and **brood**. Compared with the quite pure long 'eh' and 'oh' sounds of German, even pure ABN-speakers diphthongize these sounds to a degree, but the tendency to diphthongize them needs to be kept in check if one is to avoid sounding **plat**.

The other feature of the pronunciation of **Hollands** that attracts the label **plat** is the tendency to pronounce initial **z** as **s** (see 1.3.3) but this is not quite as stigmatized as the above.

1.3.3 *The pronunciation of Dutch south of the rivers*

The great cultural, religious and above all linguistic divide in The Netherlands is between those provinces lying north of the great rivers (**de Lek/Rijn**, **Waal** and **Maas**) and those lying south of them (**ten zuiden van de grote rivieren = beneden de Moerdijk**), i.e. North Brabant and Limburg, as well as part of Gelderland. The primary shibboleth of southerners is

their **zachte gee**, i.e. both **ch** and **g** are pronounced like 'ch' in German 'ich', whereas northerners pronounce **ch/g** with the 'ch' of German 'ach', but usually with even more rasping than in German. But what is more, it is very common for southerners to distinguish between **ch** and **g**, which a northerner never does, by pronouncing **g** as a *voiced* fricative [γ], which is what the distinction in spelling between **ch** and **g** was originally based on, but only in the south is the distinction still made.

The distinction between **f** and **v** (i.e. the voiceless versus the voiced fricative) at the beginning of a word is seldom made by northerners; in other words, in their Dutch the two have fallen together in favour of the voiceless sound, which is exactly what has happened with **ch** and **g**. Just as southerners are more inclined to distinguish in pronunciation between the latter two sounds, so too do they distinguish between **f** and **v**—they start off pronouncing **v** as in English but end the sound by articulating an **f**. This distinction is sometimes made by northerners too in very formal sounding speech. The distinction is a difficult one for foreigners to make and not one worth trying to make: by pronouncing all initial **v**'s as **f**'s you will sound perfectly (northern) Dutch, whereas by trying to make the distinction there is a good chance your **v** will sound like an English 'v', and this must be avoided at all costs.

It should be pointed out that failing to make a distinction between **ch/g** and **f/v** has also been applied to **s/z** in the colloquial Dutch of the north, e.g. **zeven zakken** is pronounced **seve sakke**. Although most northerners commit this sin from time to time, to do so consistently sounds **plat** and is thus to be avoided for sociological reasons. It is also a characteristic of Surinam Dutch, in which case the sociological connotations are somewhat different.

The tendency of Hollanders to diphthongize **ee** and **oo** (see 1.3.2) is totally absent in the south. Here, if anything, the reverse occurs and the diphthongs **ui** and **ei/ij** tend to be monophthongized. For historical reasons these southern traits are not stigmatized but should not be copied unless one otherwise speaks a consistently southern Dutch. Of the two **r**'s discussed in 1.2, only the uvular one occurs in the south of The Netherlands, but with a difference from the uvular **r** of the north. Here it has a particularly throaty, velar quality, not unlike a French 'r' and it is referred to as **een gebrouwde r**. **Brouwen**, which means 'to pronounce one's r's in a throaty way as southerners do'. It is the other great shibboleth of a southerner after **een zachte gee**.

1.3.4 *Differences in pronunciation between The Netherlands and Flanders*

First, let it be said that in many cases it is difficult to draw a distinction between the pronunciation of the language in the Dutch-speaking provinces of Belgium and the Dutch provinces south of the great rivers, but the national border does form a linguistic border to a certain degree. Flemish intonation is commonly rather French sounding to a Dutch ear and Flemings do not have a uvular **r**. Many Flemings drop their **h**'s, in which case their **g**'s tend to sound like **h**. This means that **een gele hoed** can sound like **een hele oed**. In general, the differences between Flemish Dutch and that of The Netherlands are to be found more in the lexicon and word order, and thus go beyond the scope of this chapter.

Students requiring detailed information on assimilation, stress and other aspects of pronunciation are advised to consult R.H.B. De Coninck *Groot uitspraakwoordenboek van de Nederlandse Taal*, Uitgeverij De Nederlandsche Boekhandel, Antwerpen, 1974 (second edition) and E. Blancquaert *Praktische uitspraakleer van de Nederlandse Taal*, De Sikkel, Antwerp, 1969. Pages 141–9 in the latter book contain a very good description of Dutch stress patterns. The most recent authoritative publication on pronunciation, produced under the auspices of the Nederlandse Taalunie, is J. Heemskerk and W. Zonneveld *Uitspraakwoordenboek*, Spectrum, Utrecht, 2000. There is even a free online version of this book.